

Crisp cluster
plunged in shadow.
Drops of violet water
and raw sunlight
floated up with your scent.
lego

The door hissed shut, swallowing the faint scent of fresh-cut flowers. I stood there for a beat, the cold metal panel a barrier between me and William, between me and Est. My smile, the one I'd plastered on for them, felt brittle, already cracking.

'Oh. Okay. I get it.'

The words had tumbled out, automatic, a shield. But I didn't get it. Not really. Not yet.

My feet moved on their own, carrying me down the polished hallway. The plush carpet muffled my steps, making the silence feel even louder, more oppressive. Each footfall felt like a small betrayal—away from William, away from the apartment that had been my second home for a decade.

'I hope you two have... fun.'

My voice echoed in my head, thin and reedy. What was I thinking? Asking about a movie? William never watched movies with anyone but me. We had a system: old black-and-white films on rainy Wednesdays, popcorn with too much butter, my head on his shoulder while he pretended not to cry at the endings. That was ours. And why was he so stiff? So... dismissive?

"Lego, I think Est and I were in the middle of something."

William's words, precise and sharp, replayed. 'Something.' My chest tightened. What kind of something? He hadn't answered my texts all week. Not about the art supplies, not about the painting, not even about the new client who wanted a whole garden of peace lilies.

He always answered my texts.

The elevator descended, a slow, deliberate drop. The knot in my stomach tightened with each floor, each number counting down like a verdict.

William and Est. Est, the photographer. P'Tui's friend. The one who made William "do things." The one P'Tui said could see past the grumpiness.

Oh.

The realization hit me with the force of a slammed door. Not a physical door, but the one in my mind that had been stubbornly refusing to open. They were on a date. A date. And I, like an idiot, had burst in with my sunflowers and my chatter about new clients and art supplies. I'd interrupted them.

My cheeks burned with shame. How could I have been so blind? William, uncomfortable. His jaw tight. His hand on my shoulder, not a comforting touch, but a gentle push. "I'm... busy right now. Can we reschedule?" He hadn't said "Can we reschedule our conversation?" He'd meant "Can we reschedule your visit?"

The elevator chimed, depositing me in the deserted lobby. The security guard, a hulking man named Barry who always smelled faintly of coffee and peppermints, nodded a silent greeting from behind his desk. I managed a weak wave. Barry always had a kind word, a smile, a comment about the weather or the flowers I was carrying. a smile. Today, I couldn't even muster a real one back.

I pushed through the heavy glass doors and stepped out into the city.

The city air bit at my exposed skin. I'd worn my favorite bright hoodie, the one that always made me feel like a walking ray of sunshine. Now, it felt like a costume. A lie I was telling with my body.

The sky above was a bruised purple, heavy with unspoken threats. A chill wind whipped around me, tugging at my long hair. I hadn't even bothered to braid it.—the extensions I'd grown to love, the ones I wore because they made me feel like someone else, someone more whole. I hadn't even bothered to braid it today. It hung loose and wild, whipping around my face like dark flags of surrender.

My hands felt empty, useless. I usually left William's apartment humming, a spring in my step, already planning next week's bouquet. Today, there was just a hollow ache. William, my William, who always listened to my endless stories, who always let me ramble about dance class and strange clients and the absurd prices of rare pigments. He had... dismissed me. Kindly, yes. But dismissed all the same.

Today, there was just a hollow ache where that purpose used to live.

Drop.

A single drop splattered on my cheek, cold and sharp. Then another. And another. The sky opened up, not a gentle drizzle, but a sudden, angry downpour. The wind

howled, snatching at my hoodie, chilling me to the bone.

I pulled my arms around myself, hunching my shoulders, trying to make myself smaller, less visible. My hair, usually a source of pride, now plastered to my face, heavy and cold. The city lights blurred through the sudden sheet of rain, painting streaks of neon on the slick pavement. Every splash, every gust, felt like a personal assault. Like the world was trying to wash me away.

Where was I going? Downtown, to the flower shop? No. P'Tui would be there. Tui, who knew Est. Tui, who probably knew all about William and Est. P'Tui, who would see right through my forced cheer. I couldn't face Tui right now. I couldn't face anyone.

My eyes burned, but I blinked the tears back.

Crying wasn't allowed. Not for me. Not when everyone else needed my light. William needed my light. But what if he didn't anymore? What if Est was his new light? A stronger, brighter light that didn't need a silly, chattering friend bringing him flowers every Wednesday?

That was the deal, wasn't it? That was the unspoken contract I'd signed when I was thirteen years old and my parents started fighting, when I learned that being quiet and sad only made things worse, only made them fight harder about whose fault I was. Being bright, being cheerful, being useful—that was how you earned your place. That was how you made people want to keep you around.

William needed my light. He'd said so, hadn't he? You bring me inspiration. You're so full of life.

But what if he didn't need it anymore?

My chest tightened, a vice grip squeezing the air from my lungs. The rain streamed down my face, mingling with the tears I was desperately trying to hold back. My clothes, thin and unsuited for the sudden cold, clung to me, heavy and sodden. My teeth chattered, a frantic rhythm against the roar of the rain.

A splash. A car whizzed past, drenching me further, but I barely registered it. I just kept walking, head down, shoulders hunched, letting the rain wash over me, hoping it would wash away the ache inside.

Was that what my parents saw?

The thought surfaced unbidden, dark and familiar. An ornament that no longer had a place in their homes. Something decorative that had served its purpose and could now be stored away, out of sight, while they built new lives with new families. They sent money. Every month, like clockwork, the transfer appeared in my account. Enough to cover rent, tuition, food. Enough to prove they hadn't forgotten me

entirely.

But they never called.

They never asked how I was doing, whether I was eating enough, whether my dance was going well. They never asked about my friends, my dreams, my fears. The money was a transaction, not a relationship. A way of saying you're handled without having to actually handle me. And now William—the one person who'd felt like family, the one constant in a decade of chaos—was slipping away too.

My vision blurred. My steps slowed.

I didn't know where I was going anymore. I just knew I couldn't stop moving. If I stopped, I might fall apart entirely, might dissolve into the rain and wash away down the gutter with the rest of the city's debris.

Then—

A sudden warmth. A shield.

I stopped, bumping into something solid. A dark shape loomed over me, blocking the worst of the deluge. My head snapped up, ready to apologize, ready to plaster on a smile and pretend I was fine.

My head snapped up. Brown hair, slick with rain but somehow still perfectly, framed a familiar face. Eyes, kind and crinkling at the corners. A soft, encouraging smile that I'd know anywhere.

“Lego?” Tui’s voice, a warm rumble, cut through the din of the rain. He held a large, black umbrella, its dome a surprising shelter in the chaos. “What are you doing out here, little sprout? You’re soaked to the bone.”

My breath hitched. Tui. Of all people. The one person I absolutely did not want to see. The one person who saw too much, who looked at me with those knowing eyes like he could read the parts of me I kept hidden.

“P'T-Tui?” My voice cracked, betraying the careful facade I usually wore for him.

His eyes, usually full of playful mischief and teasing warmth, now held only concern. Deep, genuine concern that made something in my chest crack open.

“Yeah, Come on, get under here properly. You’ll catch your death.” He extended the umbrella further, pulling me gently closer. His arm, solid and warm, brushed against mine.

“I... I was just...” My mind scrambled for an excuse, a lie, anything to explain why I was wandering aimlessly in a downpour, looking like a drowned rat. But the words wouldn’t come. The dam I’d built, brick by careful brick, suddenly crumbled. A sob

tore through me, raw and uncontrolled. My shoulders shook. The carefully constructed mask shattered. The tears, hot and stinging, poured down my face, mixing with the cold rain.

The carefully constructed mask—the one I wore for William, for customers, for dance instructors—shattered completely.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay.” Tui’s voice was softer now, laced with an almost painful tenderness. He didn’t question, didn’t demand an explanation. He just pulled me fully under the umbrella, his free arm wrapping around my trembling shoulders.

His embrace was surprisingly firm, protective. My head tucked against his chest, I could hear the steady thrum of his heartbeat, a comforting rhythm against my own frantic one. His jacket, thick and surprisingly dry, offered a small measure of warmth.

“It’s okay, Lego,” he murmured, his fingers gently stroking my hair, pushing the wet strands from my face. “Just let it out. You don’t have to be strong right now.”

And that was it. That simple permission. The words I hadn’t known I desperately needed to hear. The floodgates opened completely. I buried my face against his chest, the muffled fabric soaking up my tears, and I cried. I cried for William’s stiff jaw, for the unspoken dismissal, for the gaping hole that Est seemed to have filled. I cried for the flowers I’d left on William’s table, for the messages that went unanswered, for the years of being William’s constant light, only to realize he might not need it anymore. I cried for my parents, who sent money but never calls, for the empty apartment I called home, for the endless part-time jobs that kept me busy but never truly filled the void. I cried for the constant pressure to be cheerful, to be bright, to be the one who always smiled. Tui held me, a silent, unmoving anchor in the storm. He didn’t try to shush me, didn’t offer empty platitudes. He just held me, letting me unravel, letting me finally break.

After what felt like an eternity, my sobs subsided into shaky gasps. My chest ached, my throat was raw, and my eyes felt swollen shut. I pulled back slightly, embarrassed, trying to wipe my face with the back of my hand, but it was just as wet as the rest of me.

Tui’s thumb, surprisingly gentle, brushed away a tear from my cheek. “Better?” he asked, his voice still soft, no trace of judgment.

I managed a small nod, sniffing. “S-sorry.”

“Don’t be.” he countered, a faint smile touching his lips. “You needed that. We all do, sometimes.” He looked around, the rain still pouring. “Come on. My studio isn’t far. We’ll get you warm, get some hot chocolate into you.”

He didn’t wait for an answer, just kept his arm around me, guiding me down the

street. The umbrella, a vast, dark canopy, shielded us both. His presence, warm and solid beside me, was a stark contrast to the cold, wet world. We walked in silence for a few blocks, the only sounds the drumming rain and my own ragged breathing. He didn't push, didn't pry. He just walked, a steady, comforting presence.

I shouldn't feel this way. William deserves to be happy. And Est—okay, yes, Est looked at me with jealousy in his eyes, but he also apologized (internally, probably, but the look in his eyes when William explained our history softened). He's not a bad person. He's just... new.

And new is scary.

New means change. New means I'm not the constant anymore. New means Wednesday flowers might become Thursday flowers, or maybe no flowers at all because William will be too busy being alive with someone else to remember the ritual that's defined our friendship for three years.

Finally, he stopped in front of a storefront with a stylized raven tattoo on the glass. The sign above, a swirling script, read "Ink & Ashes." He fumbled with a set of keys, the metal cold against his fingers.

"Here we are." he announced, pushing open the door. A small bell chimed, a surprisingly cheerful sound.

The studio was a haven. The air inside was warm, dry, and smelled faintly of antiseptic and something sweet, like incense. Soft lighting bathed the space in a gentle glow. Tattoo machines sat neatly on a counter, vibrant inks lined shelves, and intricate designs adorned the walls, a mesmerizing tapestry of art. It was nothing like William's stark, minimalist apartment. It was Tui. Wild, creative, comforting.

"Go on, sit." He gestured to a plush, oversized armchair in a corner, draped with a thick, knitted blanket. "I'll get you a towel and some clothes."

I sank into the armchair, the soft fabric a welcome relief against my chilled skin. My body still trembled, but the frantic edge had dulled. Tui disappeared into a back room, returning a moment later with a fluffy, dark blue towel and a stack of clothes – a soft, oversized hoodie and a pair of sweatpants.

"Here, get out of those wet things." He handed them to me, his gaze kind but firm. "Don't want you catching a cold on top of everything else." He turned his back, giving me a moment of privacy.

I stripped off my soaked clothes, shivering as the cold air hit my skin. The hoodie and sweatpants were warm, soft, and smelled faintly of Tui – a mix of his cologne and the sweet incense. They swallowed me whole, the sleeves hanging past my fingertips, the pant legs pooling around my ankles. But they were dry. And warm.

“Better?” Tui asked, turning back around. He smiled, a genuine, easy smile that reached his eyes. “You look like a very comfortable, very small gnome.”

I managed a weak, watery laugh. “Thanks.”

He nodded, then headed for a small kitchenette area. “Hot chocolate coming right up. Extra marshmallows, right?”

My favorite. He remembered.

A fresh wave of emotion, this one surprisingly warm, washed over me. He returned with a steaming mug, its warmth radiating through the ceramic. The sweet, rich scent of chocolate filled the air. I wrapped my hands around it, letting the heat seep into my numb fingers.

“So...” Tui began, settling into a chair opposite me, his gaze soft. He didn’t push, didn’t demand. He just waited.

I took a sip of the hot chocolate. It tasted like comfort, like childhood, like everything I’d been missing. “William...he had a date.” I whispered, the words still raw, painful to speak. He hadn’t told me, at the same time. Guilt. Wasn’t this what he wanted? For William to open up to the world again.

Tui’s eyebrows raised, just slightly. “Ah.” He nodded slowly. “Est.”

My head snapped up. “You knew?”

He sighed, running a hand through his damp hair. “Est was spiraling about it all week.”

My heart sank further. He knew. He knew all along. And I was the only one in the dark.

“He didn’t tell me.” I mumbled, staring into my mug. “He didn’t answer my texts. And then I just... I showed up. Like an idiot. With flowers.”

“You’re not an idiot, Lego.” Tui said, his voice firm. “You’re thoughtful. You care about your friend. And William... William is just getting used to letting people in again, you know that.”

“I know.” I whispered, a fresh wave of tears pricking my eyes. “I know he has. And I’m always there for him. I always have been. Since we were kids. After his mom died, after his dad left... I was the one who kept coming. Even when he pushed everyone away.” My voice broke. “He called me his light. He said I brought him inspiration.”

Was I just something pretty to paint? another decoration in his apartment?

Tui’s expression softened, a deep well of empathy in his eyes. “He’s not wrong,

Lego. You are his light. You've always been there for him. But sometimes, people need different kinds of light. And sometimes, even the brightest lights need a break."

"He just... threw me out." I choked out, the hurt resurfacing with renewed intensity. "He just wanted me to leave. He didn't even listen to me about the art supplies. Or the painting I saw. He just wanted to be alone with Est."

"He wasn't throwing you out, Lego." Tui corrected gently. "He was trying to have a private moment. A new moment. And you, bless your heart, you just happened to stumble into it." He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "It doesn't mean he doesn't care about you. It just means he's... figuring things out. And you interrupting probably made him feel awkward, not that he was rejecting you."

"But it felt like rejection." I confessed, the words tumbling out, raw and honest. "It felt like I wasn't needed anymore. Like my light wasn't enough. Like I was just... useless." Was that what my parents saw? An ornament that no longer had a place in their homes. My voice cracked again, and a fresh wave of tears blurred my vision. The hot chocolate suddenly tasted like ashes. All the carefully hidden anxieties, the fears of abandonment, the desperate need to be wanted and useful—all of it spilled out.

Tui reached across the small table, his hand covering mine, warm and steady. "You are never useless, Lego. Never. You are one of the most vibrant, kindest people I know. You bring joy wherever you go. You make people smile. You make me smile."

"Why does it feel like I'm being replaced?"

Tui's thumb strokes across the back of my hand. "Because change is terrifying, and you're grieving. You're grieving the version of William that only had you, and the version of your friendship that existed when you were the only light in his darkness."

Tears prick at my eyes. "I don't want to lose him."

"You won't." Tui says.

His words, simple and heartfelt, were a balm to my wounded soul. I looked up, my eyes meeting his. His gaze was unwavering, full of a quiet understanding that saw past my tears, past my broken façade, straight into the aching core of me.

"But sometimes." I whispered, my voice barely audible, "sometimes I don't want to be the light. Sometimes...I just want to be sad. And not have to pretend."

"You don't have to pretend here." Tui assured me, his thumb gently stroking the back of my hand. "You never have to pretend with me. You can be as sad, as angry, as lost as you need to be. I'll just sit here. And I'll listen. And if you want to cry some

more, you cry. And if you want to tell me everything that's been weighing you down, you tell me. I'm here."

And for the first time in as long as I could remember, I didn't feel the need to hold back. The words, the fears, the exhaustion, they all spilled out.

I told him about my parents, about their new lives, about the money they sent that felt like a substitute for love. I told him how they'd fought over who had to take me for holidays, how they'd eventually solved the problem by just... not taking me at all. How I'd spent my sixteenth birthday alone in the apartment they rented for me, eating instant noodles and pretending the silence was peaceful instead of crushing.

I told him about my sister, who was born with a heart that wasn't strong enough to keep her, who spent her whole life in and out of hospitals. About how my parents poured everything into her—their time, their attention, their hope—and I understood, I understood, she needed it more than I did. But understanding didn't make it hurt less.

I told him how she died when I was twelve. How the house went silent in a different way after that—not the anxious silence of waiting for bad news, but the hollow silence of nothing left to wait for. How my parents looked at each other across the dinner table and saw only grief, only blame, only the unbearable reminder of what they'd lost.

I told him about the endless jobs, the dance classes, the constant need to keep busy, to avoid the suffocating silence of my own apartment. About how I took on extra shifts even when my feet ached, even when I was so tired I could barely see straight, because being busy meant not thinking. Not feeling.

I told him about the long extensions I'd grown to love, hoping they'd someday be naturally long, a symbol of something enduring. About the makeup I wore to hide the dark circles, the bruises that bloomed on my skin when I pushed too hard in rehearsal, the way I smiled through the exhaustion because that was what people expected from me.

I told him about the fear of disappointing anyone, especially William. About how terrified I was of being useless, of being extra, of being the person people tolerated instead of wanted.

About the exhaustion of being On all the time.

He listened. He didn't interrupt. He didn't try to fix me. He just absorbed it all.

He's looking at me like I'm not broken. Like I'm not the bright, energetic friend who holds everything together. Like I'm just... Lego. Tired, scared, grieving Lego who

needs someone to hold him for once instead of the other way around.

Tui listened, his gaze steady, his hand still warm on mine. He didn't interrupt, didn't offer solutions, didn't try to fix me. He just absorbed it all, a silent, comforting presence.

When I finally finished, my voice hoarse, my chest aching from the sheer effort of baring my soul, a profound sense of exhaustion settled over me.

And a strange, tentative lightness.

"Thank you, Sorry." I whispered, my voice barely a thread.

"Thank 'you'." Tui replied, his eyes shining with an emotion I couldn't quite decipher. "For trusting me. For letting me see you, Lego. The real you."

He stood, pulling me gently to my feet. Before I could react, he wrapped his arms around me again, pulling me into a tight, warm embrace. This hug was different from the one under the umbrella. This one was deliberate, tender, full of unspoken comfort. My head rested against his shoulder, and I could feel the solid strength of him, the warmth radiating from him. His scent, a mix of ink and something uniquely Tui, filled my senses, a grounding presence. And then, unexpectedly, his own shoulders trembled. A soft, muffled sound escaped him.

This hug was different from the one under the umbrella.

"P'T-Tui?" I pulled back slightly, my own eyes wide with surprise. His eyes were glistening, a single tear tracing a path down his cheek.

He smiled, a watery, self-deprecating smile. "Sorry. Just... you're so much stronger than you give yourself credit for, little sprout. And you deserve so much more than you think." He tightened his embrace again, holding me close. "Let's get you some food. Real food, not just hot chocolate. And then maybe we can just watch a really bad movie and forget the world exists for a while. How does that sound?."

His words, his tears, his embrace. They were a revelation. In the warm, dry sanctuary of his studio, wrapped in his arms, I realized something profound. William's light might be fading for me, or perhaps just shifting. But here, in the quiet strength of Tui's embrace, I found a different kind of light. A light that didn't demand I be cheerful, that didn't expect me to be bright. A light that simply allowed me to be. And in that moment, in the gentle beat of his heart against my ear, a tiny, secret seed of something new began to bloom. Not a sunflower, perhaps, but something fragile, something tender, something that might, in time, grow into a love all my own.

The poem, scrawled in my notebook from years ago, suddenly made sense. I'd written it thinking of William's studio, of the flowers I brought, of the way art

bloomed in darkness. But maybe I'd been writing it for this moment all along. For the shadow of the umbrella. For the violet bruise of the sky. For the raw sunlight of Tui's kindness. For the scent of something new.

For the shadow of the umbrella.

For the violet bruise of the sky.

For the raw sunlight of Tui's kindness.

I looked across the studio, where Tui was arguing with a truly terrible action movie on the small TV, throwing popcorn at the screen whenever the hero said something cheesy.

"That's not how physics works!" he shouted, and I laughed—a real laugh, surprised out of me.

He turned, grinning, and for a moment, the whole world felt lighter.

Maybe I wasn't losing my place in the world. Maybe I was just... making room for a new one.